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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 001353

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SUBJECT: POLITICAL NOTES ON AMBASSADOR'S VISIT TO WESTERN VENEZUELA

REF: A. 2008 CARACAS 1636

[B](#). CARACAS 330

[C](#). CARACAS 778

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Classified By: Political Counselor Robin D. Meyer  
for Reason 1.4(b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Ambassador traveled to Venezuela's western states of Zulia and Falcon October 4-8 and met with a range of political leaders. Complaints of Colombian guerrillas operating openly in Zulia and reduced budgets were widespread. Pablo Perez, the opposition governor of Zulia, said he was trying to build consensus through effective governance. Zulia State Assembly President Eliseo Fermin described his mission as "defending federalism." Oswaldo Rodriguez Leon, Chavista mayor of the city of Coro, accepted the Ambassador's courtesy call and experienced protests the following day for having done so. End Summary.

The Opposition Governor: Seeking Creative Solutions Amidst Financial Squeeze

[1](#)2. (C) During a lunch with the Ambassador on October 4, Zulia Governor Pablo Perez described the various ways the Venezuelan government (GBRV) has denied revenues and funding to Zulia since the PSUV loss in the November 2008 elections. This has included: the transfer of many resources and revenue streams to the central government (ref a); nationalization of ports, highways and airports (ref b); and the nationalization of numerous oil service companies (ref c). The central government has also excluded Zulia from national development projects. In addition, the ongoing dispute with Colombia has caused cross border trade to plunge.

[1](#)3. (C) Governor Perez said 2010 would be a critical election year in Zulia because of the special election for the mayorship of Maracaibo, the community councils and the National Assembly (AN). Perez described the electorate as unhappy over rising food prices, decreasing security, poor housing and electricity shortages. The Governor added that kidnapping by both criminal gangs and Colombian guerrillas remained high and had even spread to Chavez's home state of Barinas, where the capital is known as "Ciudad Secuestro" - Kidnap City. Odalis Caldera, Zulia Secretary of Security and Public Order, explained that kidnapping and carjacking were Zulia's most common crimes and related how her investigators were ordered to turn around by alleged armed and uniformed members of the FARC while investigating a crime in rural Zulia.

14. (C) Perez explained his daily strategy as "in the streets and in the barrios," looking to find a middle ground to build consensus. According to Perez, the next election will have no room for individualists. Opposition incumbents should seek to build unity through results rather than rhetoric. The Governor admitted that he had to "get creative." He said he remained committed to the Zulia - Lara interstate highway, a project from his mentor and predecessor Manuel Rosales.

The Chavista National Assembly Deputy: Recognize GBRV Counternarcotics Efforts

15. (C) The Ambassador held a cordial impromptu meeting with PSUV Deputy Calixto Ortega, a member of the lapsed Boston Friendship group, on October 4. The Ambassador noted that his return was unprecedented and reflected a serious commitment by the Administration to try to engage Venezuela. Ortega gave the busy overseas schedule of Foreign Minister Maduro as a possible explanation for the lack of meetings with the Foreign Ministry. On the subject of counternarcotics cooperation, Ortega suggested that U.S. recognition of Venezuela's accomplishments in counternarcotics could help advance the relationship. Ortega also pointed out that U.S. objections to arms sales and technology transfers had diminished Venezuela's counternarcotics capacity, requiring them to buy replacements from China (sic). Ortega also added that the National Assembly was discussing a law that would allow a shoot-down policy against drug flights. The Ambassador cautioned about the dangers associated with a shoot-down policy and the consequences for a counter-narcotics program if mistakes are made.

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The Zulia State Legislature: No Room for Bi-partisanship

16. (C) On October 6, Zulia State Legislature President Eliseo Fermin and nine of fifteen sitting deputies hosted the Ambassador for lunch. The hosts explained that the three PSUV legislators had been invited, but had declined the invitation for fear of retribution for "consorting with the empire." Fermin, a member of the "Un Nuevo Tiempo" (UNT) party, complained that the GBRV has "criminalized bi-partisanship," noting they could not even pass legislation to protect Lake Maracaibo. Fermin described his goal in Zulia as "preserving federalism," and criticized Chavez for "always changing the rules" to remain in power. Although he accused Chavez of only speaking to the poor instead of empowering them, he was equally caustic towards the opposition who "haven't offered a plan to govern since 2006." Fermin pointed out Chavez's control of the public airwaves meant that "we only win where there is cable TV."

The Archbishop: Working Toward Coexistence

17. (C) Monsignor Ubaldo Santana, Archbishop of Maracaibo, told Ambassador Duddy on October 6 that while times were difficult due to budget cuts, the Church remained strong in the region and maintained good relations with the evangelicals. Pope John Paul II had instructed the Episcopal Conference of Venezuela to work towards coexistence. However, the new Mayor of San Francisco, a sprawling outer borough of Maracaibo, is an ardent Chavista and is actively harassing church-run private schools. The GBRV has drastically cut its subsidy to the Catholic schools, leaving four schools without money for salaries and benefits. Santana is looking at how to implement a U.S. model where churches can be more self-reliant. Santana found the new education law to be very generic and abstract and thought its implementation would vary depending on an individual's interpretation. When asked about rural parishes, Santana

related a story where a squad of FARC guerrillas took a priest into the Venezuelan jungle to perform a baptism at a FARC camp.

The Chavista Mayor: Asking Permission to Meet

18. (C) In neighboring Falcon state, Chavista Mayor of Coro, Oswaldo Rodriguez Leon, cordially received the Ambassador for a courtesy call on October 8. (Note: Despite having previously agreed to the meeting, Rodriguez's office telephoned the Embassy the night before saying that he needed the Foreign Ministry's permission to hold the meeting. The Embassy sent a dipnote to the Foreign Ministry informing it of the previously agreed-upon meeting. The Foreign Ministry notified Polcouns at 10:30 pm that the Foreign Ministry had conveyed its approval to the Mayor. End Note.) A career police officer and self-professed Bolivarian socialist, Rodriguez described various development projects in the area. The Mayor also expressed his admiration for the United States, telling how he traveled to Wyoming to receive his master's and doctorate degrees from Preston University. (Note: Preston is a for profit institution formerly based in Wyoming. End Note.) As if to show how busy he was, Rodriguez made it a point to lay out three mobile phones on the coffee table so he could attend to calls during the meeting. Members of his staff photographed and videotaped the encounter. (Note: The following afternoon, about two dozen Chavistas in Coro protested the Ambassador's visit, calling it "a provocation." End Note.)  
DUDDY